

Burrowing Crayfish - Who's digging in my paddock?

Have you seen small mounds of dirt in paddocks? Chimneys of soil grow up from the holes. These structures are the work of burrowing crayfish.

Who digs the burrows?



Burrowing crayfish are relatives of yabbies. This group of Crustacea, is recognised by a pair of large claws and two other pairs of smaller nippers. They can be brown, black even dark purple. Growing up to 120 mm in length.

The family is most diverse in Australia. Burrowing crayfish are one of 34 species. Many of these species have a limited geographic range and some found only in a single catchment area.

The carapace is more flattened from side to side and the abdomen (tail) is smaller and often bristly. So small in fact that they are not edible.

What is under the openings of the burrows?

Burrowing crayfish in damp environments and wetlands of South-West and Eastern Victoria and Tasmania. Their homes vary according to species and depend on their habitat.

As the crayfish excavates the burrow it brings soil to the surface and places the pellets around the entrance until a chimney grows up to 13 cm high.



Their burrows reach down to the water table. Exit burrows divide near the surface where there are several openings. Waste from the excavations is brought to the surface where pellets of soil are deposited and run down the slope to form a chimney of dirt.

What are the crayfish doing down there?

The crayfish spends most of its time in the chamber at the bottom of its burrow so is rarely seen. Only at night does it become active bringing soil to the surface. It feeds mostly on decaying roots and buried plant matter, but sometimes eats worms or insects. Some species live alone but others are more communal.

Male and females usually come together to mate in spring and eggs are incubated attached to the tail of the female. Juveniles hatch in mid-late summer. After hatching they may remain in their parents' burrow or migrate to start a life of their own.

The burrowing crayfish is a very specialised fauna of aquatic crustaceans and insects, some not found in other watery habitats.

Conservation

Because the burrowing crayfish's habitat is threatened by land clearing and drainage, the species themselves are thought to be threatened.

Burrowing Crayfish – TEAM CHALLENGE

Family Groups:

Who are the relatives of the burrowing crayfish?

What is the name of the group of animals the crayfish belong to?

Sculpt: Create model of the burrowing crayfish.

Appearance:

What extra features do the burrowing crayfish have?

What colours are they?

Sculpt: Create the nippers of the burrowing crayfish.

Chimneys:

How big can the chimney be built?

Why are chimneys made?

Sculpt: Make a chimney of the burrowing crayfish.

Burrows:

Do burrowing crayfish live alone?

When do they come out of their burrows?

Sculpt: Create a burrow of the burrowing crayfish.

Food:

What does a burrowing crayfish eat?

Sculpt: A meal for the burrowing crayfish